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Walt Whitman

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William Mackintire Salter







# Walt Whitman

Two Addresses

by

William Mackintire Salter

PHILADELPHIA: S. BURNS WESTON

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I.

## THE GREAT SIDE OF WALT WHITMAN.\*

BY WILLIAM M. SALTER.

I AM aware that to many the name of Walt Whitman suggests what is problematical or even offensive rather than anything else. I shall speak of this in a subsequent lecture. At present I wish to speak of some of the things in his writings that appeal to us directly—that, as Adam Bede said of certain words of Scripture, shine by their own light and need no candle to show them. As not long ago I went over some of the great passages in his writings, I said to myself, What a shame that because of their being bound in with a few things that offend, they should be practically lost to the world! I wonder how many of you have read the “Passage to India,” which contains not a line to which one could object, and at the close fairly touches the sublime? Or the “Song of the Open Road,” with its freedom and joy and mighty seriousness? Or the “Song of the Broad Axe,” or the “Song of the Exposition,” or “A

\*This and the succeeding address were first given before the Society for Ethical Culture of Philadelphia in the autumn of 1894. The quotations are from the large complete edition of Whitman’s works, published (two volumes in one) in Philadelphia in 1888. Messrs. Small, Maynard & Co., of Boston, have since brought out the same (with additions) in more convenient shape. But the greatest service to the general public has been rendered by Professor Oscar L. Triggs, of the University of Chicago, in his recently published *Selections from Walt Whitman* (Small, Maynard & Co.) The reader will find most of the great things of Whitman in this volume. The earlier little books of selections by Mr. Arthur Stedman are quite inadequate.

Song for Occupations"? Yet these are things that have the largeness, the power, the inspiration, that take them into the circle of the great literature of the world. I wonder how many have even read "Drum-Taps," written during war-time, that still stir the blood, and contain not one false or ignoble note. Perhaps the only poem of Whitman's that is widely known is "O Captain, My Captain"—a tender tribute to our martyr President, yet giving scarcely a hint of the imaginative levels, the capacious ranges of thought, that in my judgement constitute Whitman's best claims to distinction.

Accordingly I can perhaps do no better service than by making Whitman a little known to some to whom he has been little more than a name before, and to this end I shall not so much talk about him, or attempt any estimate of him—for which, indeed, one would need to be far better acquainted with literature in general than I am—as let him speak. My office will simply be to set some of his thoughts in order. And as it is thoughts I am intent upon, I shall excuse myself from commenting on Whitman's style, and will not discuss the mooted question as to whether his poetry *is* poetry or not. I acknowledge the awkwardness, and even slovenliness, of his lines, at times, the slang, the amusing little affectations in which he sometimes indulges—though when inspiration comes to him he leaves all this behind. On the other hand, he surely has lines of simple melody, of which Tennyson need not have been ashamed:

" Long and long has the grass been growing,  
 Long and long has the rain been falling,  
 Long has the globe been rolling round." \*

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\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 158.

He is capable of a felicitous line like this :

“ Welcome, ineffable grace of dying days.” \*

Still again, of an image like this :

“ He judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling round a helpless thing.” †

How could one surpass this? “ The sun falling round a helpless thing.” There are still other lines having just that grace and perfection of form, of which he was ordinarily so careless. But I will not linger.

The central thought, the great unifying thought, of Whitman, is that of the significance, the worth, the sacredness, of individual existence. I know of few, if of any, who have expressed this thought with more power, more reality. He holds on to the substance of the Christian tradition in this respect. Men are not lost in masses—classes, races, or humanity—to his mind. The individual man, the single, separate human soul, stands always foremost before him. It is as when Emerson says, “ Souls are not saved in bundles.” They are not saved in bundles, and they do not exist in bundles. Every one feels, however closely he may be associated with others, and however blessed may be the association, that he is himself, and, in a sense, no one else knows him, and no one else can take the place of him.

“ No one can acquire for another—not one,  
No one can grow for another—not one.” ‡

—this is Whitman’s refrain. With this thought ever before him he declares that nothing is good to him that ignores individuals.§ We are apt to think that the indi-

\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 72.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 269.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

vidual does not count for much, that the species, the race, is all. We say in these days, and try to find comfort in it, "The individual dies, but the race lives on." But that is just the opposite of Whitman's thought. Each and every one counts, and neither in time nor eternity can any one take the place of another. "Each who passes is considered," he declares, and "the young man who died and was buried," "the young woman who died and was put at his side," "the little child that peeped in at the door and then drew back and was never seen again," "the old man who has lived without purpose, and feels it with bitterness worse than gall"—all, all count.\* It is this thought that breeds in him a universal human respect and a universal human affection. As he sits alone, yearning and thoughtful, it comes to him that there are other men in other lands, yearning and thoughtful,

"It seems to me I can look over and behold them in Germany,  
Italy, France, Spain,  
Or far, far, away, in China, or in Russia or Japan, talking other  
dialects,  
And it seems to me if I could know those men I should become  
attached to them as I do to men in my own lands,  
O I know we should be brethren and lovers,  
I know I should be happy with them."†

It is this same thought that leads him (as if to test it and make sure it was real) into those catalogues of all sorts and conditions of men, that to some are so wearisome or else repulsive. For how easy it is for us to say "all men are our brothers," or "all are the children of God;" but how difficult to say, This felon on trial in

\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 70.

† *Ibid.*, p. 106.

trial in court is our brother, or this bedraggled woman, or that far-away savage, that Hottentot with clicking palate, that dwarfed Kamtschatkan, that Austral negro, naked, red, sooty, with protrusive lip, grovelling, seeking his food, that haggard, uncouth, untutored Bedowee, that benighted roamer of Amazonia, that Patagonian, that Feejeeeman! \* Yet this is what Whitman says, and these lists, these individualized portraits, are eloquent to those who see the thought, the impulse that led to their creation. Yes, with a touch of humor that is rare in him (I sometimes ask myself, Was there any humor in Whitman? †—he is generally so deadly in earnest)—of humor, if it be such, that at once passes into the profoundest gravity, he says, after confessing he belongs to his city and feels the significance of whatever he sees there:

“The little plentiful manikins skipping around in collars and tail’d coats,

I am aware who they are (they are positively not worms or fleas),  
I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallow-  
est is deathless with me,

What I do and say the same waits for them,

Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them.” ‡

\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, pp. 119–120.

† So G. Sarrazin. “Whitman differs from Richter by a total lack of humor. (*In Re : Walt Whitman*, p. 161.) But cf. T. B. Harned: “Many Sunday evenings I called on my way to church, and he always enjoyed telling me with fine irony (for he was full of quiet humor): ‘Well, Tom, you know my philosophy includes them all—even the Unitarians!’ ” (*In Re: Walt Whitman*, p. 356.)

‡ *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 68.

In a similar spirit:

“The interminable hordes of the ignorant and wicked are not nothing,  
The barbarians of Africa and Asia are not nothing,  
The perpetual successions of shallow people are not nothing as they go.”

—*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 336.

It is evident that all this presupposes a peculiar and distinct view of human nature. It is customary now (perhaps it has always been so, but it seems to be particularly the case since the advent of modern science) to contrast the littleness of men with the greatness of nature. The world about us is undoubtedly bigger than we—if by we is meant our body. And if we have simply these outward material standards of measurement, it does become somewhat absurd to make so much account of man. But Whitman proposed other standards of measurement. How much of a philosopher Whitman was, I do not know—certainly there is no philosophy (no reasoned thought, that is,) in his poems, nor would it be in place there. But this one may say—that some of the ripest results of philosophical analysis and reflection are to be found here and there in his pages, though they appear as feelings, presentiments, intuitions, rather than as reasoned products. Whitman is aware of the difference between personality and all other things. He pictures himself not overawed by nature, but standing at ease before her,

“—aplomb in the midst of irrational things.” \*

“I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,” † he boldly declares. He is not contained, he assures us with absolute simplicity, between his hat and his boots.‡ This idea that there is more to man than what is seen, or that, as Tennyson puts it, man is not what he sees and other than the things he touches—this idea of a mysterious somewhat beyond the body or anything that can be measured or laid hold of—this is real and living in all

\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 16.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 34.      ‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 34.

that Whitman writes. This inner life it is that makes the real greatness of man. It is that immediately known to man, and yet it is in a sense unknown—yes, far more unknown than known; it stretches out beyond the consciousness of any moment, or perhaps of all the moments of our life.

“Why even I myself, I often think, know little or nothing of my real life,

Only a few hints, a few diffused faint clews and indirections.\*

And again he declares, “the real me stands yet untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d,”† notwithstanding all his “arrogant poems.” Yes, this wealth of inner being which is other than suns and stars and greater than they, and the consciousness of which Whitman sublimely says should make our souls stand composed and cool before a million universes‡—this it is in which and to which the glory of the world itself appears. “The atmosphere,” he says (and Berkley could not have said it better), “is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless. It is for my mouth forever.”§ The pageant of nature, of earth and air and sky, is, he feels, a pageant for man; it is in his eyes and in his heart; he contains it as truly as it contains him—so that if you leave him out of account it is impossible to say what it is,

“May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills, shining and flowing waters,

The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms,

May-be these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions,  
And the real something has yet to be known,”||

\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 202.      † *Ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 14.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 322; cf., “That immortal house more than all the rows of buildings ever built.” (“The City Dead House,” p. 285.)

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 29.      || *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 101.

—which amounts to saying that perhaps *all* things have an inner side just as man has, and that we make a huge mistake if we judge of anything—even what we call inanimate nature—by the outside alone. Of man himself, he declares once with remarkable penetration, that it is not his material eyes that finally see, nor is it his “material body which finally loves, walks, laughs, shouts, embraces, procreates.”\* The central energy, the undiscovered life, the fathomless depths behind all that appears—that is the true man, according to Walt Whitman; and hence man’s peculiar and unique place in what we call the universe, hence his transcendent, and, as Whitman believed, imperishable worth.

And whether we can follow all this, or are content to rest our thought of the worth of man on a basis of instinct and sympathy alone, few will question that man is the highest form of existence that we know.

“A ruddy drop of manly blood  
The surging sea outweighs.”

To these lines of Emerson we all instinctively assent, nor is there anything in nature that does not stand lower in our estimation, and that we will not sacrifice, use up, for the sake of keeping a man alive. It is the old thought, “Ye are of more value than many sparrows.” Who ever did anything great for man who did not have a great thought of man—whether he could formulate the reasons for it or no?

But such being the greatness of man in Whitman’s estimation, everything connected with him has a ray of sacred significance. The body does not exhaust him, but it is a part of him, an expression of him in this life

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\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 146.

of his on the earth—and it, too, is sacred. It is a false spiritualism that is ashamed of the body, or of any part of it. There may be sayings of Whitman that rightfully offend, but there are other sayings that offend only because we ourselves are not pure and clean. They offend the prurient, but not the chaste and the holy. In the legend of our first parents we read that it was not till they had sinned that they were ashamed. When Whitman says,

“ Welcome is every organ and attitude of me, and of any man  
    hearty and clean,  
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile,”

and goes on with his wonderful description of details, this may be bold, but it is not bad—and it ought not to be bold to those who are innocent and blameless in thought and life. There is, of course, a time and place for everything, there are things we do not speak of to every one, there are privacies between two, there may be things better felt, experienced, done, than talked about at all (if speech is golden, silence may be golden, too); but that there is anything unclean in distinctive manhood and womanhood; that there is anything low, vulgar, or obscene in fatherhood any more than motherhood; that there is anything in begetting more than in being begotten, over which we must cry “ Hush,” because it is something wrong and forbidden; that, in short, Whitman, if he erred, erred in more than a question of taste; that he violated any moral principle—this is a monstrous and indeed a blasphemous assertion, since it condemns the very order of nature amid which and by which we live, and, if there be an Author of this order, condemns the Supreme Orderer, too. Said an honored minister of a

Christian communion recently, "Were we decently taught and weeded of a little of our pruriency—which is at the antipodes of purity—we should find Walt Whitman as clean as is the Creator." \* This may be too absolute a claim, but with regard to the poems I have now in mind, it seems to me exact truth.

No, we must get a new seriousness about the body, a fresh sense of its part in our life, of its intimate connections with the spiritual part of us. It is by this that we "spirits veiled in flesh" communicate with one another in this world, it is by its energies that we continue the successive generations of men on the earth, it is through these despised avenues of sense that we take the sustenance that keeps us alive and eat the bread of God—and perhaps not in surface appearance, but in its interior meaning, it is ourselves, permanent, as Whitman thought, while what is excrementitious about it passes away,† all that happens to it leaving its traces, perhaps its scars, on its inner undying part. It may be a solemn thing, how we use or misuse our body. Whitman thought so. "Have you seen (he says) the fool that corrupted his own live body? or the fool that corrupted her own live body?"

For they do not conceal themselves and cannot conceal themselves." ‡

Who that has had the bitter experience of shattered nerves and exhausted vitality that sometimes comes to so-called intellectual men and women but will own that Whitman's language is no exaggeration, "All comes by

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\* Rev. M. J. Savage in *Arena*, Sept., 1894, p. 450.

† *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 147; cf., pp. 344, 25.      ‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 86.

the body, only health puts you rapport with the universe." \* Who that would be a leader of men but knows the truth of the words addressed "To a pupil :" " You! do you not see how it would serve to have eyes, blood, complexion, clean and sweet ?

Do you not see how it would serve to have such a body and soul that when you enter the crowd an atmosphere of desire and command enters with you ? " †

For my part, I find it difficult to dissent from a word that Whitman says about the body.

And woman. Whitman's great doctrine of individuality includes her, too. She is not an appendage, a tool for man, but his equal. She has high ends of being as well as he. With characteristic simplicity and plainness of speech he announces,

" I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,  
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,  
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men." ‡

He is not afraid to contemplate the enlargement of the sphere of woman. § He pictures the great individuals of the future training themselves "to go in public to become orators and oratoresses." || He does not fear that the larger life of citizenship will contaminate and degrade woman ; the great city to him is one

" Where women walk in public processions in the streets the same as the men,  
Where they enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men." ¶

\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 265.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 302.      ¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 45.

‡ See the successive portraits of women in "Democratic Vistas," *Complete Poems, etc.,* Vol. II, p. 235.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 365.      ¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 153.

"Her shape arises," he declares in the wonderful "Song of the Broad-Axe,"

"She less guarded than ever, yet more guarded than ever,  
The gross and soil'd she moves among do not make her gross  
and soil'd." \*

And yet he never forgets the distinctive "womanhood" of woman, nor fails to celebrate her in her peculiar offices of wife and mother. He has his recognition of "womanly housework," † he celebrates "the oath of the inseparableness of two together" ‡ and "prophetic joys of better, loftier love's ideals, the divine wife, the sweet, eternal, perfect comrade." § I do not know what Whitman's private views were and some have doubted whether he believed in marriage, but I see nothing in his poems inconsistent with a recognition of a lifelong union of one man to one woman as the normal relation of the sexes. He speaks with honor of "the chaste husband" and "the chaste wife," || and if he refers to "the adulterous wish," ¶ "the treacherous seducer of young women," \*\* or "the adulterous unwholesome couple," †† it is plainly with the same feelings that we all have. And of motherhood no one has written with more feeling or a profounder appreciation.

"O the mother's joys! (he sings)

The watching, the endurance, the precious love, the anguish, the patiently yielded life." ‡‡

Let any one read his lines in memory of his own mother §§

\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 157.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 335.      ‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 80.      § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 147.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 156.      ¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 132.      \*\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 215.

†† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 156.      ‡‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 143.

‡‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 376; cf., Vol. II, p. 282, note.

or that almost stately picture, recalling a woman of the old style, of "the justified mother of men," \* and he will not doubt Whitman's sensibility in this direction. This man felt the mystery of birth and the potent spiritual influence of woman, and he celebrates both with holy reverence.

"Unfolded out of the folds of the woman man comes unfolded,  
and is always to come unfolded,

Unfolded only out of the perfect body of a woman can a man be  
formed of perfect body,

Unfolded out of the justice of the woman all justice is unfolded,  
Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all sympathy;  
A man is a great thing upon the earth and through eternity, but  
every jot of the greatness of man is unfolded out of woman;  
First the man is shaped in the woman, he can then be shaped in  
himself." †

As Whitman teaches the dignity of the body and the dignity of woman, so does he teach the dignity of labor. He is a voice of the larger conscience of to-day, and sings things that were not sung before. Who has thought before of putting the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the shoemaker into song—or, if he has, has thought of treating them not as humble folk, picturesque in their poverty and struggles, but as his equals, his comrades, his fellow-laborers in the world? Where is the great-souled democrat in poetry? Not, so far as I know, before Whitman. Some may have struck the note, but here is the full-orb'd chorus of the song. Others had the idea of equality, and perhaps heroically acted on it in relation to the slave (as Lowell and Whittier), but here it is a

\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 355.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 302-3.

palpitating reality for every day. How lovingly Whitman sings the common occupations of men? House-building, blacksmithing, nail-making, ship-joining, dock-building, fish-curing, stone-cutting, boiler-making, rope-twisting—all these and a hundred others appear in his lines\* as if to show that not one honest work of man's hand was forgotten by him or left out of account. With delightful abandon he tells us,

"I am enamoured of growing out-doors,  
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or wood,  
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and  
mauls, and the drivers of horses,  
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out." †

What a picture of the harvest field—

"Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty angels with shirts bagg'd out at their waists." ‡

"To teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade" §—this line of Whitman's represents one of the heights of his ambition; yes, he would have every man see that he really does something; every woman, too. And then what a lift he gives us in his view of labor! He sees that, sordid and commonplace as it may seem, it is kindred to the forces of the universe.

"Ah little recks the laborer,  
How near his work is holding him to God,  
The loving Laborer through space and time." ||

Who more a child of the Divine, one might say, indeed, than he who reproduces the old miracle and gives form to the formless, and arranges, combines, separates, and makes serviceable things for the uses of man?

\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, pp. 173-4-5.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 39.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 67.    § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 162.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 157.

The great idea of individuality, when it takes political form, becomes democracy. It means the abolition of classes, the end of obsequiousness, self-respect. The very essence of it Whitman sums up in his "Song of Joy," when he says,

"O the joy of a manly self-hood !

To be servile to none, to defer to none, not to any tyrant known or unknown,

To confront with your personality all the other personalities of the earth." \*

A proud, virile spirit runs through all this man's writings. His word to Americans is "*Resist much, obey little.*" † He extols "the latent right of insurrection." ‡ He admires "the audacity and sublime turbulence of the states." § He says, "Let others praise eminent men and hold up peace, I hold up agitation and conflict." || Sometimes he comes near the line of bumpiousness, and yet it is never that. There is a deep, sublime motive underlying all he says ; and this is, that we are not made for institutions, laws, good usages and the like—but they are ever and forever made for us, and we must forever see to it that they serve us. We must look into what is called good, and see that it is good, we must look into what is called justice, and see that it is justice, we must look into law throned on high, and see that it is worthy to be placed there. Once people become obedient in the old unthinking sense, submissive, imagining that the laws come from some wisdom superior to their own, and there

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\* *Complete Poems, etc.,* Vol. I, p. 146.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 15; cf. Emerson in "Politics :" "Good men must not obey the laws too well."

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 17. § *Ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 274. || *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 189.

is an end of liberty, an end of human development, a beginning of decadence. Is the warning unnecessary for us? Does it apply only to the old world, where kings and privileged classes are still allowed—though hardly even there as in former times? Look at some of our great cities. What do the forms of democracy amount to, when they are dead forms, when men, true men, “men who their duties know, but know their rights as well,” are not on hand to animate them? Is it not tame, meek, submissive beyond pity or sympathy almost, when some of our cities allow themselves to be ruled as they are? Is not the spirit of revolt, of rebellion, the proud spirit that will not brook the disgraceful practices that are so common, the very spirit that we need? The same might be said of some of our Commonwealths. A few years ago, the then Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania used this language at a dinner of the New England Society in Philadelphia. (Allowance must, of course, be made for the fact that it was an after-dinner speech; but there was evidently seriousness in it as well.) “The history of Pennsylvania is soon told. It was founded by one William Penn, who was for a time its proprietary Governor. It is composed of iron and coal and railroads. The proprietors of this State to-day are J. Donald Cameron and Matthew Stanley Quay.” \* Yet at this, too, we laugh and submit. Which is better—this, or the “turbulence,” the “insurrection,” of which Whitman speaks? To my mind, it is profoundly true, as Whitman says, that the great city is one

“Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons.” †

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\* Chief Justice Paxson, as quoted in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 23 Dec., '92.      † *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 153.

Nothing else keeps the soul of a people alive. As Wendell Phillips used to say, "When there is peace at Warsaw, there is spiritual death." Whitman glories in our industrial age, and yet he never forgets that nothing—no inventions, no machinery, no spread of comfort, no perfection of material accomplishment of any kind—can take the place of self-respecting manhood in the individual citizen.\* "Thee in thy moral wealth and civilization (until which thy proudest civilization must remain in vain)," † he says in apostrophizing America.

Yet with all said and done, what an affection this prophet of individual rights had for his country! His is not the rampant individualism that is merely self-centered and feels no ties with a larger whole.‡ The freedom he celebrates is not license§ nor does the insurrection he preaches the right of mean what that word commonly suggests to the mind. If there may be insurrection for *any* grievance, real or fancied, then had the South a right to secede from the Union, and it was criminal to put the Rebellion down. The answer to such logic on Whitman's part was his "Drum-Taps." What fiery energy breathes through them! And in almost his latest poem he says,

"I announce that the identity of these States is a single identity  
only,

I announce the Union more and more compact, indissoluble." ||

\* "I swear I begin to see the meaning of these things." *Ibid.*, p. 273.

† *Ibid.*, p. 350.

‡ Cf. the broad and philosophic spirit of his words in "Democratic Vistas," *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 213, note, and p. 219.

§ "Democracy too is law, and of the strictest, amplest kind. Many suppose that it means a throwing aside of law and running riot." ("Democratic Vistas," *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 219 and p. 336.)

|| *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I., p. 381.

Addressing the Union in those magnificent lines, "The Song of the Exposition," he says,

"Without thee neither all nor each, nor land, home,  
Nor ship, nor mine, nor any here this day secure.

Our farms, inventions, crops, we own in thee! cities and States in  
thee!

Our freedom all in thee! our very lives in thee!" \*

Undoubtedly there must be a spiritual as well as a physical bond, and Whitman most powerfully says this; undoubtedly mere constitutions or mere arms are unavailing—

"Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing will so cohere."

But that on occasions law may be used, and the unwilling, the rebellious, be compelled, he questions quite as little.† Whitman was indeed too great a man to be a radical merely any more than a conservative. The freedom in which he believed was, notwithstanding the seeming extravagance of some of his utterances, an august freedom. It was a freedom consistent with what he called "the immortal laws."‡ He sang of man "for freest action form'd under the laws divine."§ The modern political movement he interpreted as Freedom, with Law on one side and Peace on the other.|| In speaking of America he said:

"Lo, where arise three peerless stars  
To be thy natal stars my country, Ensemble, Evolution, Freedom,  
Set in the sky of Law."¶

It is this balance, this equipoise of mind, that makes

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\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 164-5. † *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 247-269.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 14.

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 9.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 370.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 350.

Whitman great and sane, and prevents his being claimed by the sectarian. He had his strong insistances, yet he saw the place of other things as well.

As Whitman sets his face to the future, he has unmeasured hope. To him progress is a law of life. The race has gone so far, it will go farther. There is an atmosphere of divine cheer on his pages, the like of which I hardly know in any modern writer—or for that matter in any writer.

“In this broad earth of ours,  
Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,  
Enclosed and safe within its central heart,  
Nestles the seed perfection.

By every life a share or more or less,  
None born but it is born, conceal’d or unconceal’d the seed is  
waiting.”\*

This is his deep, central thought. Man and all things are born with an impulse toward more than they are. You cannot label them and say, this much they are and nothing more will come of them. Give time—“the amplitude of Time,” to use one of Whitman’s great phrases—and even the primitive nebula, mere mist and smoke, becomes what we see to-day. It is a mystic, not a mechanical world, in which we live. There are fires, energy, hidden away in nature, deep on deep, and no plummet can sound them, and no temporary achievement can exhaust them. It is a great, solemn, divine universe in which we live. Do we believe this, or, if we do, is it hearsay with us? Then let me say that here was a man, for whom the belief was a part of his flesh and blood. In an age of surface thinking and of surface

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\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 181.

living, of scepticism and ennui, he stands forth as one of the great believers. Others rest on the past; he too rests on the past and does not disdain it, but he is ready to go beyond it. This fair universe is to him a procession.\* Speaking of what the past has bequeathed to us, he says:

"I have pursued it, own it is admirable, (moving awhile among it,)

Think nothing can ever be greater, nothing can ever deserve more than it deserves,

Regarding it all intently a long while, then dismissing it, I stand in my place with my own day here."†

"Outlining what is yet to be"‡ is one of the great tasks to his mind. He addresses America, "Thou Mother with thy Equal Brood,"

"Belief I sing, and preparation;

As Life and Nature are not great with reference to the present only, But greater still from what is yet to come,

Out of that formula for thee I sing."§

He sang our Civil War, and yet in the "Song of the Exposition" he says,

"Away with themes of war; away with war itself!"||

"Amelioration is one of the earth's words,"¶ he declares; and in "The Mystic Trumpeter" he dares to dream of "War, sorrow, suffering gone—the rank earth purged."\*\*

And yet the progress Whitman celebrates is always in the last analysis the progress of souls. All he sings, he says, "has reference to the soul."†† He never loses

\* *Complete Prose, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 85.      † *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 20.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 11.      § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 347.      || *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 162.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 176.      \*\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 358.      †† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 25.

himself in material magnitudes, in general laws or abstractions. All is concrete, individual, and the progress is the progress of single, separate human souls.

"To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls," \*

—such might be almost called an epitome of his philosophy. "I tramp a perpetual journey (he says in his homely, yet vivid manner),

" My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,

No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,  
I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,  
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,  
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road."

And then,

" Not I, not any else can travel that road for you,  
You must travel it for yourself." †

A loving, yet stern and salutary teacher! What more moving and solemn thought is there than that the universe is a scene wherein we are placed to grow, to unfold all the hidden possibilities of our nature, each for himself, each separately valuable, each separately accountable—yes, I add this, for though Whitman does not make much of it, he does not ignore it, and says something of America that he would doubtless say of each individual:

" If we are lost, no victor else has destroyed us,  
It is by ourselves we go down to eternal night." ‡

\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 127.      † *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 73.

‡ *I bid.*, Vol. I, p. 264.

And this law of progress, which is the law of life as we know it, is, to Whitman, the law of all life, the law of all the worlds.

"Gliding o'er all, through all,  
Through Nature, Time, and Space,  
As a ship on the waters advancing,  
The voyage of the soul—not life alone,  
Death, many deaths I'll sing."\*

—this is his message.

"If I, you [he says] and the worlds, and all beneath or upon their surfaces, were this moment reduced back to a pallid float, it would not avail in the long run,

We should surely bring up again where we now stand,  
And surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther."†

"There is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage," is his conclusion. Hence the death we dread so much may be different, to use his everyday language, "from what any one supposes and luckier"‡—yes, to his mind, is so. The principle he applies to all the varied stages of life, "However sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwelling, we cannot remain here,"—such words apply to the last stage as well, and to his rapt vision, we go, we go, he knows not where we go, but he knows we go toward the best—toward something great.§ It is a sublime faith, one that nourishes, is good for the soul.

The climax of Whitman's thought and of Whitman's verse is, to my mind, reached in the "Passage to India." It is not for every day, any more than other things he wrote are for everybody. It is rather a holy scripture

\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 218.      † *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 73.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 34.      § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 127.

of the new world, and should be read on stately occasions in church or cathedral. In it he rises to imaginative levels, the like of which do not exist out of the Bible or of *Æschylus*. After reading it I know why Whitman speaks of dropping “in the earth the germs of a greater religion” \*—for this is religion, something that takes us into the realm of the vast and the infinite.

“Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,  
 At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,  
 But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me,  
 And lo, thou gently masterest the orbs,  
 Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,  
 And fillest, swellest full the vastnesses of Space.

Greater than stars or suns,  
 Bounding O soul thou journeyest forth ;

Passage to more than India!  
 Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights ?  
 O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like those ?  
 Disportest thou on waters such as those ?

Then have thy bent unleash'd.  
 Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas !  
 Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems !  
 You, strew'd with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never  
 reach'd you.

Passage to more than India !  
 O secret of the earth and sky !  
 Of you O waters of the sea ! O winding creeks and rivers !  
 Of you O woods and fields ! of you strong mountains of my land !  
 Of you O prairies ! of you gray rocks !  
 O morning red ! O clouds ! O rain and snows !  
 O day and night, passage to you !

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\* *Complete Poems, etc., Vol. I, p. 23.*

O sun and moon and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!

Passage to you! \*

Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!

Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!

Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!

Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?

Have we not grovel'd here long enough, eating and drinking like  
mere brutes?

Have we not darken'd and dazed ourselves with books long  
enough?

Sail forth—steer for the deep waters only,

Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,

For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,

And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!

O farther, farther sail!

O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?

O farther, farther, farther sail! †

\* Cf., Socrates' picture of a possible paradise, as reported in the "Phædo:" "The sun, the moon and the stars they see as they really are; and are blessed in all other matters agreeably thereto."

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 322-323.

## II.

# THE QUESTIONABLE SIDE OF WALT WHITMAN.

IN SPEAKING previously of the problematical or even offensive in Whitman, I had not in mind his frank celebration of the glory and dignity of the human body, but of a graver matter. Those words in praise of the body—of the body of man and the body of woman, and those mysterious and supreme functions of the body, fatherhood and maternity—may jar on us, may wound our sense of propriety, may make us feel that while true they relate to feelings and experiences too sacred and intimate for utterance; but they offend no graver, no properly moral, sensibilities. What I had in mind was rather things that offend the moral consciousness itself—or at least seem to, when we first come upon them. It is not easy or pleasant to speak of these things, and yet in any discussion of Whitman they cannot be left out of account—and after all our first duty is not to any man, or to his name or reputation, but to ourselves and the truth. Whitman himself wished no blind followers; in a great moment he charged that there be no theory or school founded out of him,\* and if we do battle with some of his teachings, it is only in the same free, manly

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\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 190.

spirit, of which he was in the first place so sturdy an illustration.

Suppose that in science or philosophy one said that there was no great difference between falsehood and truth, that one should make as much of one as the other, and care for one as much as the other, surely there would soon be an end of science or philosophy. The very meaning of science is the pursuit of truth ; the only horror of the scientific man, as I think that apostle of science, Prof. Huxley, once said, is to believe a lie. In the same way morals rests on the antithesis between good and bad. Practically it means a choice, and the very opposite of indifference. It means rising up out of the life of mere impulse and chance emotion, the life in which we are pulled like mere puppets this way and that (to use the metaphor of Marcus Aurelius), and taking our stand with principles. When, then, some one says there is no great difference between good and evil, that one is no more important in the universe than the other, that as for himself he can stand indifferent in face of the contest going on, that he thinks it would be better if we could be relieved of the distinctions, and could make as much of vices as of virtues, he does not indeed put an end to morals—for that is not so easy to do, the basis for it lying rather deep in nature herself—but he does, if we are innocent and unsuspecting enough to believe him, weaken moral convictions in our own minds and take moral nerve and stamina out of us. Yet this is the way in which Whitman sometimes appears to speak. They are only some of the things he says—yes, a small part of the total—and it were foolish to condemn him absolutely on this account and to forget the noble ranges

of thought of which I tried to give glimpses last week—yet there they are, and at any moment you are liable to stumble on them. For instance, he says:

“ Let others ignore what they may,  
 I make the poem of evil also—I commemorate that part also,  
 I am myself as much evil as good—and I say there is in fact  
 no evil,  
 Or if there is, I say it is just as important to you, to the earth, or  
 to me, as anything else.” \*

Evil has been ordinarily thought something to be shunned, avoided, contended with and conquered; in these lines it is rather something to be commemorated, it is covered with the dignity of good—in a word, it is set down as not really evil, which is very much like saying in science that falsehood is truth. No wonder, then, that Whitman could exclaim :

“ O to be relieved of distinctions! to make as much of vices as virtues!”

and again—

“ What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?  
 Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me—  
 I stand indifferent.” †

Yes, though Whitman took pains in later life to tell us in noble language that liberty was not license,‡ he celebrates outright sexual lawlessness in two poems, which I should be almost ashamed to read to you and he should have been ashamed to have written. In one of them he recalls one of those “ free unions ” between man and woman, which false apostles of liberty nowadays are preaching the right of, and in which Whitman was appa-

\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 22.

† *Ibid.*, p. 46.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 336.

rently not above indulging himself in his early days. In the other he pictures himself going to a brothel, not to win and to save, but to partake in the loose delights there, to share in the midnight orgies—to show, forsooth, that he was no better than the inmates, to make himself their poet.\* If there is no difference between what is pure and what is vile, then so let it be and let us have done with talking of ethics, conscience and the rest; but if there is a difference, if there is any meaning to right and wrong, if there are any "immortal laws" such as Whitman elsewhere speaks of, safe and forever unhurt, however men may disobey them, if in the natural divine order of things the union of the sexes means, as Whitman commonly himself implies, fatherhood and motherhood, and the responsibilities of the same, and not a mere riot of the senses, then is such a poem as "Native Moments" an almost unpardonable offense, a scandal in the eyes of all right-minded men.

How can we explain such utterances as these, how was it possible that they should have come from such a man as I have before portrayed to you? According to the best light I have been able to get thus far, I should say three causes co-operated: (1) sympathy with men; (2) a certain unthinking, unmoral way of looking at the universe—only a part of his total view, and having nothing necessarily to do with it; and (3) a peculiar theory of his function as poet. Let us take these up in order.

The first and most honorable cause to Whitman was his sympathy with men. It is impossible to doubt this sympathy. It shines out on every page he has written. He took all men into his embrace with a wealth of affec-

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\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whittman*, Vol. I, p. 94.

tion that it is difficult to find the like of in literature—and which in its tenderness and its range recalls the Man of Love and Sorrows who would have gathered the children of Jerusalem together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings. It may sound extravagant to say this, but if you read and read and read in Whitman, I think you will come to feel that it is not more than the truth.

"Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me,  
why should you not speak to me?  
And why should I not speak to you?" \*

How simple and truly human! Sympathy with the rank and file, with the average man, how real it is with him! I know of few things more pathetic, that more go to the heart of hearts within us, than passages like "The Million Dead," and "The Real War will never get into the Books," in *Specimen Days*.† And yet the test of our sympathy is ever whether we can love men, despite their badness. To love the good, the noble—that is not so difficult; but to love those who are not good and noble, to pierce through the surface of things, and all that is merely actual, and find and treasure the possibilities of good that are in every one—ah, that is not so easy, and because it is so difficult, we call it divine. Now it was by following along this path of universal sympathy that Whitman was in part led to those strange and repellent utterances we are considering. He loved men, and he loved all men, whatever their character, whatever their weaknesses, failings, vices or crimes. In this, too, he perpetuates the heart of the Christian tradition. But

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\* *Complete Poems and Prose*, Vol. I, p. 18.

† *Ibid* Vol II .

there is one thing that has always to be borne in mind in connection with sympathy, one thing that Christianity, Jesus, never forgot. It is that we should love men despite what is evil in them, not because of it. Never can a man of conscience show sympathy with sin. We may love the sinner and go over earth or through hell to save him, but we can never have other than disapproval for sin. If you cease to have disapproval, conscience dies in you—and you become a mere mush of sentiment, without light, without dignity, yes, without any great divine reason for love. To celebrate man and the better possibilities of man, however for the time he may be hardened and degraded, is always in order. To celebrate wickedness, to celebrate the very things in which man goes counter to the true law of his being, to take what is low and treat it as if it were high, to give to evil the praise of good—this is never in order, and is never done save with injury and debasement to man (so far as it has any effect at all). Whitman apparently did not remember this; he said things that another, with the whole wealth of sympathy which was in Whitman's heart, and yet with keen conscience as well, simply could not have said. There were elements in Whitman's nature that seem to have drowned conscience at times. And this is why we have to contend with him, as well as admire him—contend with him as man with man, and show that however great he was, there was a summit of greatness he did not reach. And this is why unqualified comparisons of him with Jesus, as are sometimes made, will not do. Imagine Jesus' sympathizing with outcast women so that he was willing to riot with them! You cannot. Or sympathizing with them so that he could

celebrate their riotousness or make poems of it ! As little can you imagine this, either. No, it was this wonderful balance, this boundless sympathy with sinners along with a mighty strenuousness about sin, that made Jesus the great divine man that he was. Nor have those (and this is in point for those who give one sort of extenuation for Whitman) who have been rescued from evil and baseness under the influence of Jesus felt that it was necessary that he should sometime or other have been evil and base in order to save them. They have been rather strengthened, braced by the thought that, though tempted in all points like as we are, he was without sin ; it is this that has made men and women revere him as I fear after all they never can Walt Whitman—and this, too, that has added to their conviction that however they may have sinned themselves, sin is not necessary or normal to the race. There is inestimable inspiration in the thought that one man, however far away in history he was, did in face of all the temptations that can beset men keep himself upright—upright, not because there was nothing in him to respond to evil, not because he was not tried, not because he lived a recluse, sequestered life, but because and solely because the will for good was so strong in him that it overtopped all else, because he mastered temptations, because though he lived in the world he was superior to the world. Critics and historians may give us reasons to doubt whether Jesus was so completely without sin, but the thought of this spotless victor has had its effect and its charm all the same—and simply as a thought cannot fail to move and charm anyone. It remains to be seen how many sinful men and women will be reclaimed by Whitman's telling them

that he participated in their sin—yes, by his celebrating it and honoring it in song. I have no doubt that his influence will be beneficent on the whole, greatly beneficent—but I think it will be in spite of, not because of, these things. Sympathy unruly by conscience, strong human love unguided by what is after all the master thing, the supremely human thing, in man—light; love drowning light and overwhelming distinctions—a divine thing made almost less than human because not conjoined with somewhat else equally divine—this, I take it, is partly responsible for the extraordinary utterances we have been considering. Whitman himself once makes a striking observation about religious fervor and emotional love. “Even in religious fervor (he says in a prose passage) there is a touch of animal heat. But moral conscientiousness, crystalline, without flaw, not God-like only, entirely human, awes and enchanteth forever.” Again: “Great is emotional love. . . . But . . . there is something greater;” and, after remarking that power, love, and even genius tried by subtlest analysis and in serenest moods somehow fail and become vain—he proceeds: “Then noiseless, with flowing steps, the lord, the sun, the last ideal comes. By the names right, justice, truth, we suggest but do not describe it. To the world of men it remains a dream, an idea as they call it. But no dream is it to the wise—but the proudest, almost only solid lasting thing of all.”\* Sublime words, O master! and had you always remembered them, there are perhaps some things you would not, could not, have written.

But there was another co-operating cause. By nature

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\* “Democratic Vistas,” in *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. II, p. 248.

Whitman was of a cheerful, buoyant, optimistic mood. He liked, as in the legend Jahweh is said to have done of old, to look out on creation and pronounce it all good. He loved the trees, animals, the very grass.

"I with the spring waters, laughing and skipping and running,"\* is one of his joyous lines. How hard to admit in such a mood that there is anything wrong in the universe—how much easier to say, I accept all, worship all, all is divine. It is not a very deep mood, not a very thoughtful mood, and yet perhaps few of us in some happy, blissful moment of our lives have not known it. We could almost deny evil or sorrow or death—and say they are impossible! Now this, which is a purely emotional state, if it could be translated into prosaic thought, would read somewhat as follows: There is no evil in the world; the things we call evil are good, when looked at from the right point of view; sin is good after all as well as anything else—it has its place, it is part of the whole, and the whole being good, every part of it is, too; why, then, make sour faces over sin, why not celebrate it, why not make poems of it? May not what is called conscience be a sort of disease, an awry way of looking at things, and is it not the healthy way to look at things as nature does, accepting all, giving sunshine to all, or as the earth does, which never complains or argues or threatens, or as the placid animals do, who never "sweat or whine about their condition," or "lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins," and simply ignore moral distinctions altogether?† Such is a possible way of looking at things, an easy way—and it is evident that

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\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 191.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 177-54.

Whitman to some extent fell into it. When we have a feeling, a view, we of course want to justify it—for whether it is rational or not, we want as reasonable beings to give it an aspect of rationality—and one of the most interesting and amusing things I know of in literature (and one of the very few amusing things in Whitman—and all the more so, because he evidently saw nothing funny about it) is a poem of his called "All is Truth."\* He says, to put it in plain prose—and the poem is one of Whitman's that is little more than prose—he says he has discovered that there is no lie or form of lie that does not grow as inevitably upon itself as the truth does upon itself. This would be thought a pretty serious truth by most people, and would suggest conclusions not merely of the temporary but of the permanent harm of falsehood. But Whitman says, seeing that lies are subject to the law of cause and effect, springing from something and in turn producing something—that is, that in one sense there is no lying about a lie, that its results are inevitable, therefore really there are no lies at all and all is truth without exception, and hence, as he concludes—

"I will go celebrate anything I see or am,  
And sing and laugh and deny nothing."

I know not which to admire most—the charming simplicity of this conclusion, or the rare logic which leads up to it. The fact is, it is a *foregone conclusion* with Whitman—and I am reminded of what Goethe somewhere said of another great vitalizing force in our century, Byron, namely, "*Sobald er reflectirt ist er ein Kind,*"

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\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 361.

("As soon as he begins to reflect or reason he is like a child"). And yet this promiscuously approving mood, this thoughtless hilarity, is not always the mood of Whitman, nor is it really more than an insignificant part of his total view of life, though it be a part that has attracted particular attention and perhaps is peculiar, characteristic, as the rest is not.

The third co-operating cause that made possible the morally trying sayings we are considering, was his peculiar view of his function of poet. "Most poets," said Whitman once in a confidential mood to a friend, "most writers, who have anything to say, have a splendid theory and scheme and something they want to put forth. I, on the contrary, have no scheme, no theory, no nothing—in a sense absolutely nothing." "Just let 'er go, eh?" said his friend. "Almost that," replied Whitman.\* Now "nothing" in these connections generally means anything—anything, that is, that the poet is prompted to say, that he feels impelled to communicate. It may be a good thing or a bad thing or an indifferent thing, it may be a noble thing or a shameless thing—anything that is vivid and real to him, anything that is honestly a part of him, he may put with it. To quote his own lines:

"I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy."†

"Nature without check"—that is Walt Whitman. The worth, then, of utterances that come in this way altogether depends on what the nature happens to be that is uttered. If it is a noble nature, the utterances will do the world good; if it is a base nature, they will do the

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\* *In Re : Walt Whitman*, p. 312. † *Poems and Prose*, Vol. I, p. 29.

world evil. Not all the genuineness or sincerity in the world will turn a bad thing into a good thing. Now the world is fortunate in that a poet of the power and splendid energy of Whitman had behind him a nature of exceptional greatness and nobility; and 'tis this that he pours forth in some of those well-nigh matchless lines I quoted last week—the world of ideas and of higher impulses is infinitely richer for this man's having lived in it. But he had, too, his weaknesses, apparently he was not without some measure of experience in shameful things,\* and to give *them* back to us, to recite these things, to display this side of his nature, not with shame, not with humiliation, but with perfect nonchalance, if not bravado, is not fortunate for the world, or for anybody, nor for Whitman himself. Let me not be misunderstood. I do not say it is well to hide the wicked things we have done. Confession is good for the soul I honor all those heroes who have torn the veils from themselves and acknowledge their sins. I find nothing but what is moving and purifying in Whitman's own self-confessions, as where he says,

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\* Cf. John Burroughs, quoted in Bucke's *Walt Whitman*, p. 23, and Dr. Bucke in *In Re : Walt Whitman*, p. 314. The *Nation*, reviewing Thos. Donaldson's *Walt Whitman the Man*, 21 Jan., '97, p. 55, says: "After he came to Camden, his life, whatever it had been, was altogether clean and sweet. As to his earlier life Mr. Donaldson quotes his confession to John Addington Symonds, that it had been 'jolly bodily,' with 'episodes of passion and permanent attachment;' the second of these phrases being, of course, a paraphrase of Whitman's bill of particulars." Peter Doyle says, however, of Whitman's Washington days: "I never knew a case of Walt's being bothered up by a woman. In fact, he had nothing special to do with any woman except Mrs. O'Connor and Mrs. Burroughs. His disposition was different. Woman in that sense never came into his head. Walt was too clean, he hated anything that was not clean. No trace of any kind of dissipation in him. I ought to know about him those years—we were awful close together." *Calamus*, p. 25.

"Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil.  
 I am he who knew what it was to be evil,  
 I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,  
 Blab'd, blushed, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,  
 Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,  
 Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,  
 The wolf, the snake, the hog not wanting in me,  
 The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish not  
 wanting,  
 Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of  
 these wanting"—\*

I find nothing but what is moving and purifying, I say, in such confession, for on the face of it it shows that it is said with no sympathy with the evil things portrayed. But confession that contains no disapproval of the thing confessed, confession that rather reverts to it with pleasure, and celebrates it, is another matter; indeed, how can one call it confession? Can one confess

"And retain the offense"?

Whitman once says :

"Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,  
 To-day I go consort with Nature's darlings, to-night too.  
 I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the mid-night orgies of young men,  
 I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,  
 The echoes ring with our indecent calls." †

Is this confession? Who, indeed, can explain such a passage in any other way than simply as a revelation of one side of the nature of the man, the whole of which he felt it his right to celebrate, reckless of what anybody

\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 132.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 94.

thought of it or of the harm it might do? \* No, confession, however full and frank it is, must be tinged with the spirit and the desire revealed in Tennyson's words :

“ Not ev'n in inmost thought to think again  
The sins that made the past so pleasant to us.”

It must breathe the sadness that one feels in Whitman's own tones, when he says,

“ I feel the measureless shame and humiliation of my race.” †

The simple fact is that it is not necessary to admire the passages here in question, it is not necessary to defend or justify or even to excuse them—I mean on Whitman's own theory of the matter ; it is no more necessary to do so than to defend or justify the moods or actions of which they are the copies. If a man says he speaks simply as nature prompts—using nature to mean any impulse within him—then it is a matter of accident whether what he says is worthy or unworthy ; we are few of us without impulses, that if they were left unruled, would not make us beasts ; and if Whitman sings the low sometimes as well as the high, we can simply so far leave him out of account, pass him by, forget him, remembering thankfully at the same time that he gives us so much else, so much more, that uplifts the soul, and is of permanent value to man. Whitman himself says that it is not those who admire him and vauntingly praise him that know him best, he admits

\* Cf. what he says of himself in writing anonymously of his own poems : “ He makes audacious and native use of his own body and soul. He must recreate poetry with the elements always at hand. He must imbue it with himself as he is, disorderly, fleshy and sensual.” *In Re: Walt Whitman*, p. 14.

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I., p. 358.

that he contains contradictions, and it is for us as free men to take what is good in him and reject what is bad, just as we do with any other person.\*

And I sometimes think that the best antidote to what is of questionable influence in Whitman's writings is to be found in Whitman himself. There are things, not merely of the sort I referred to last week, but others, that are inconsistent with the spirit and temper and whole mood of what I have been referring to to-day. It is of course understood that it is of moral good and evil that I am now speaking. Of any other kind of evil we cannot say positively that it is evil. Who can say that anything in nature, even lightnings and floods, or that any constituent element in human nature, including the appetites and passions—who can say that even sorrow and disappointment and pain and death are evil. No, there is only one thing in the world that we can say is absolutely evil, and that is the evil will—the source of lies, cheatings, murders, adulteries, and the whole noisome brood of vices and crimes; just as the immortal Kant said that there was only one thing absolutely good in the world (or even out of it), and that was the good will. One may approve the universe and the great order of things amidst which we live, and disapprove sin. There is a place and a time for everything in the world—for everything but the evil will; for that there is no time and no place—it is an anomaly, an outlaw, an absolute blot, in this fair world. There never was a place for selfishness, for injustice, for wrong—not from the beginning of human history till now. How these things came to be is a question for science and philos-

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\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 98.

ophy, but however they came to be, we must, if there be any meaning to conscience, disapprove of them.

The practical mark of a true moral nature hence comes to be struggle. The stars, the elements, have perhaps learned to do their work, and there may be nothing to add to or to subtract from them. Man is still learning to do his, and the man who has fully learned is not yet here. There may come an end to struggle some time, but not yet—not for most, at least. Now we are not to imagine that Whitman was unaware of this graver side of life. He was not always this promiscuously-approving, preferenceless, all-receiving and nothing-excluding kind of man that the passages I quoted at the outset might suggest to us. If, indeed, he believed that all was right as it is, how could he have preached the gospel of insurrection as he did—insurrection against all that binds and cramps and thwarts the free energies of man? The fact is, Whitman was never equally receptive to the varying and contradictory qualities of men, save momentarily when under the influence of a false sympathy. Instead of accepting the world in its totality, he really only accepted a part of it in his deeper moments, and said that all else was transitory, with no permanent reason for being, and destined to pass away. How profound a thought is that which he expresses in the following :

“ Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is  
good steadily hastening towards immortality,  
And the vast all that is call’d evil I saw hastening to merge itself  
and become lost and dead.” \*

How can then evil have the place in the world that good

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\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 216.

has? If it is as important to the world as good, why is it not preserved and perpetuated? In another poem Whitman does indeed reckon Satan as an eternal part of the world—but Satan is there not so much opposed to good as to oppression, falsity in the form of good. And then observe the extraordinary language—the *little* that is good hastening to immortality, the *vast all* that is called evil hastening to pass away. Is it possible, we ask, that Whitman with full consciousness says this? Does he, too, then, have a glimpse of the old deep truth about the “strait gate” and “the narrow way?” Yes, I think he had. He saw that what was so real and palpable to most men was in another sense not real at all, and that what seems unreal, but “a dream, an idea,” to many, is the supreme reality. Out and away from the noise and glare and false bustle and false democracy of to-day he could pass with easy tread into the sacred temple of ethics and religion. He knew what Isaiah and all the great have known—that one thing alone is regal in the world, “right, justice,” and all the rest is dust and ashes before it. Never does Whitman hesitate, when he is his real self, in homage before this, never does he waver in choice of that good above all other good.\*

With this illumination, other things take their due place in his estimation. He sings himself, “Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature,” † yet he knows in his moments of insight that Nature is after all no model for us; and in a confession which is pathetic when we read

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\* A way of reconciling this attitude with the actuality and even necessity of evil he offers in asserting that the bad and vicious *will sometime* take their place in the true order of things. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 331.

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 299.

between the lines, that more than once he felt temporary depression for fear that in "Leaves of Grass" the moral parts were not sufficiently pronounced, he adds that "while the moral is the purport and last intelligence of all nature, there is absolutely nothing of the moral in the works or laws or shows of nature. . . ." \* I sometimes think that there are visible signs, particularly in what he wrote amid the stirring crisis of the war, of the struggle between that simply receptive attitude toward nature which he sometimes shows, and on the other hand his sense of laws and ideals beyond all that nature can teach. "Now we go forth," he wrote in those great days,

"Now we go forth to receive what the earth and the sea never gave us." †

"An idea only and yet furiously fought for," he says of the flag.‡ Of slavery he says, "Slavery—the murderous, treacherous, conspiracy to raise it upon the ruins of all the rest,

"On and on to the grapple with it." §

Of politicians at Washington in the old ante-bellum days, this :

"Who are they as bats and night-dogs askant in the capitol!  
What a filthy Presidentiad! . . .

Are those really Congressmen? are those the great judges?  
Is that the President? Then I will sleep awhile yet, for I see that  
these States sleep"—||

language which recalls what Michael Angelo once wrote of his beloved Florence—

\* Preface to Edition of 1876, Vol. II, p. 284 n.

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 229.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 228      § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 268.      || *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 218.

“ ‘Tis well to slumber, best to be of stone,  
While shame endures and Florence is not free.” \*

Nor were all contests those of war to Whitman’s mind. He does not forget and says that “the tug and mortal strain of nations come at last in prosperous peace, not war,” † and when the war was over he besought its spirit, as if half conscious of his temptations to wander in easier paths, to live on in his verse, to leave to him its “pulses of rage.” ‡ With noble struggle he is in sympathy always. He has “songs of stern defiance ever ready ;” § he has “heroic angers ;” || he betrays a scorn of temporizers, patchers. The progress he believes in makes great requirements :

“Allons! yet take warning!  
He travelling with me needs the best blood, thews, endurance,  
None may come to the trial till he or she bring courage and  
health.

Come not here if you have already spent the best of yourself,  
Only those may come who come in sweet and determin’d bodies,  
No diseas’d person, no rum-drinker or venereal taint is permitted  
here.” ¶

Yes, Whitman addresses the evils that have overcome *him*, degradations, tussle with passions and appetites, meannesses, broken resolutions—

“Ah think not you finally triumph, my real self has yet to come forth,

It shall yet march forth o’ermastering, till all lies beneath me,  
It shall yet stand up the soldier of ultimate victory.” \*\*

And so in words that are like a “steel bath” to our souls, he says :

\* Dr. T. W. Parsons’ translation.

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 350.      ‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 253.

§ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 270.    || *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 273.    ¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 125.

\*\* *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 364.

"Weave in, weave in, my hardy life,  
 Weave yet a soldier strong and full for great campaigns to come,  
 Weave in red blood, weave sinews in like ropes." \*

No, this man believed in struggle and that there was something to struggle for. He juggles occasionally in the vain effort to make out that falsehood makes no difference; yet when it comes to practice he is as clear as day. "Henceforth let no man of us lie," he says, "for we have seen that openness wins the inner and outer world, and that there is no single exception and that never since our earth gathered itself in a mass have deceit or subterfuge or prevarication attracted its smallest particle." † He knows that there is a moral order, and not one word or deed, he says, but has results beyond death as really as before death.‡ He acknowledges a standard—

"All that forwards perfect human life" §  
 it is.

"Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding," ||

he says in a noble apostrophe to the locomotive. "Thine own track"—yes, there is a track, and off it is disaster. He roundly declares, "The difference between sin and goodness is no delusion." ¶ It is a deep view of life that is thus suggested, a grave view—and whether it is consistent with Whitman's optimistic view of immortality for every one, however he may have stood the test of life, I will not undertake to say; it is too great a sub-

\* *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 365.

† *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 272.

‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 290.      § *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 160, cf. 181.

|| *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 359.      ¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 335.

ject for discussion now.\* But that the *possibilities* of greatness and of immortality are in all men, even the most degraded and seemingly lost—this I firmly believe. And I join in Whitman's solemn language—

“ Nothing is sinful to us outside of ourselves,  
 . . . .  
 If we are lost, no victor else has destroyed us,  
 It is by ourselves we go down to eternal night.” †

Nations come to an end and individuals may, but it is not by anything that happens to them, but by their own willing refusal to follow the track marked out for them, by their own rebellion against the immortal laws.

So I sum up by saying that, as with so many other men, there is a surface and there is a deeper side to Walt Whitman—and though the surface may strike the eye more, the deeper side it is that moves the soul. And there is one merit in all the things, even in the worst things Whitman wrote—and that is, he never assumed, never pretended. Much may be forgiven a man, he somewhere says, who has perfect candor. ‡ It does not make the bad things good things—but there is one baseness it is forever delivered from, that of falsehood. Much, too, I think, may be forgiven a man who loved as Whitman loved.

Whitman himself said that his poems might do not only good, but evil also—yes, perhaps more evil than

\* The question is, Can character be fixed? Cf. “A Hand Mirror,” closing, “Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning!” Vol. I, p. 213. Also close of “The City Dead House,” p. 285. Also, “Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth, ever afterwards resumes its liberty,” p. 15.

† *Complete Poems, etc.*, Vol. I, p. 264.      ‡ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 272.

good.\* And they may do evil—but more evil than good? That is impossible. And by a beneficent process of selection, which time, “the only righteous judge,” is ever conducting, the evil things will be gradually lost to sight, buried and forgotten, and the good things, the great things will remain, to long bless and ennable and cheer the hearts of men.

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\* *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Vol. I, p. 98.

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